Group's business is uniting Arabs and Jews Companies in Israel, divided by ethnicity, have common goals: [FINAL Edition]

Little, Robert . Little, Robert.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Both men say that much of their lives is defined by their ethnicity because they live in Israel - where Jews mix with Jews, Arabs mix with Arabs and exceptions are almost always awkward and strained. It's a reality of life in their part of the world, and an intractable one.

[Mohammad Mansour] and Rabinson, both 31, are part of a program called Building Business Bridges that is designed to promote economic development and business relationships among young Jewish and Arab business people. Thirteen participants - seven Jews and six Arabs - visited Baltimore yesterday for the start of a two-week tour in the United States.

Organizers of the Building Business Bridges program say its goal is not so much to have Arabs and Jews embarking on joint business ventures, although at least one such arrangement took root after an earlier program. Rather, they hope to slowly create a network of businessmen and women in Israel who, like Rabinson and Mansour, might begin building relationships that surmount the traditional ethnic barriers in Israeli society.

FULL TEXT

Mohammad Mansour is an Arab, and Levy Rabinson is a Jew.

They think of themselves as much more than that, of course. They're fathers and businessmen, and each is a certified public accountant.

But both men say that much of their lives is defined by their ethnicity because they live in Israel - where Jews mix with Jews, Arabs mix with Arabs and exceptions are almost always awkward and strained. It's a reality of life in their part of the world, and an intractable one.

It's also bad for business, so they want it to change.

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While Mansour and Rabinson are in the same business in the same country, both say they would never have met if not for the determined effort to bring them together.

"Now, when I have a question that involves the Arab community, I know I can call Mohammad and say `Help me,'" Rabinson said.

"And Levy can help me the same way," Mansour said.

"We have made a connection," Rabinson said. "We will start from there."

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"We're not looking for people to love each other, but to realize that they live in a society where people have common interests and common goals," said Sarah Kreimer, co-director of The Center for Jewish-Arab Economic Development in Jerusalem, which sponsors the program.

"They're from different cultures, and we want to bridge that gap."

Participants in the program spent six months together studying international business and conflict resolution at Tel Aviv University. They met every Thursday and Friday - equivalent to Friday and Saturday in the United States - and returned to work during the week.

Their two-week tour of Baltimore and Washington is being underwritten by The Associated: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore.

After meeting with state and local economic development officials yesterday, the group got a briefing about Baltimore's Empowerment Zone urban renewal program - and found themes that resonated with their lives at home .

"Here it's black-white, there it's Arab-Jew, but many of the problems are the same," said Barry Bogage, executive director of the Maryland/Israel Development Center, which coordinated the group's visit.

Ethnic groups in Israel are, in many ways, more segregated than racial groups in the United States - partly as a matter of geography, but also by government edict.

Arabs do not join the Israeli Army, for instance, and are thus denied access to many of the social welfare programs available to veterans, Bogage noted.

Business arrangements occur much the same way, said program participant Uri Yogev, a Jew who manages the Negev Olive Oil company.

Arabs have their traditional businesses, Jews have theirs.

Yogev joined the program because his business - making olive oil - is dominated by Arabs, and he considers tolerance and networking a financial necessity.

"I know people now who come to my house, and I go to theirs. That never would have happened before," said Yogev, 36. "We have differences, but we all want to take part in the future of Israel, and not let it be destroyed."

The Building Business Bridges program is open only to Israeli Arabs, not Palestinians living in the West Bank. The Center for

Jewish-Arab Economic Development had accepted several Palestinian participants, but they were refused entry into Israel by the Israeli government. Officials at the center expect to try again next year.

"We live in Israel, but the two cultures are separated, and there are very few relationships between them," said Mansour, who runs an accounting firm in the Arab city of Tira. "We want to do things with the Jewish sector - we are trying - but it is very difficult. We will keep trying."

Said Rabinson: "I believe that finally, eventually, we will be working together. But it will take time.

"This is just a beginning, and right now is a difficult time in Israel. What do they say? Buy when prices are down? Well, that's what we are doing here. We are buying now."

Illustration

Photo(s); Caption: Tour: Barbara Bonnell (left), of Baltimore Development Corp., talks with Sarah Kreimer, Center for Jewish-Arab Economic Development, as Barry Bogage, Maryland/Israel Development Center, and Michal Samuels, Tel Aviv, confer.; Credit: KARL MERTON FERRON : SUN STAFF

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